

Aristotelian Artist Statement: Neil LaBute *Shape of Things*

Directing and Staging a Production

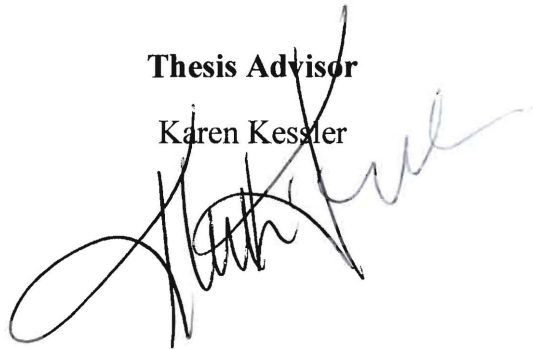
An Honors Thesis (THEAT405)

by

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Thesis Advisor

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Karen Kessler', is written over the printed name.

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Abstract

Theatrical studies calls for both the analysis of scripts and the critique of performance. Directors make choices based on the script to tell a particular story with the aid of actors, staging, music, and costume. Staging a full-length production of *The Shape of Things* by Neil LaBute will combine my liberal arts based education with my production training to create an enjoyable night at the theatre for those who attend. There will also be a written paper submitted in addition to the performance that details the rehearsal process and my rationale for the decisions I made.

1. Direct and Produce a Play
 - a. Script analysis
 - b. Rehearsal process
 - c. Technical rehearsal
 - d. Run of the show
 - e. Written Reflection
2. Stage a Production
 - a. I will have to function without the direct help of the theatre department to acquire rights and venue.
 - b. The play is about the defining art in the context of a Midwest college town, so it parallels my own life experience.
 - c. I will be self-motivated to audition actors, find a venue, and schedule the rehearsal calendar. This is more responsibility than I took on in my last production project.
3. My target audience is those who enjoy contemporary theatre or contemporary artwork.
 - a. Those with an interest in art, relationships, theatre, college students and the faculty that teaches them.
 - b. Those in the community who support the arts.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Karen Kessler for advising me through this project. Her help during this long and difficult task was only a small fraction of the help and guidance I received during my college career.

I would like to thank Tania Said-Schuler for her guidance during my fellowship at the David Owsely Museum of Art at Ball State University.

Plot

The Shape of Things by Neil LaBute is about creating art and defining relationships. Evelyn is sculpting her thesis; Adam is defining his relationships with Evelyn, Phillip, and Jenny. Adam unknowingly becomes the subject of Evelyn's sculptural thesis. As she uses sex and suggestion to carve out an improved man, Adam questions how exterior improvements have changed him for better or worse. Evelyn insists each person is free to openly interpret and perceive art; Adam argues someone always pays a price when artists cross the line from "saying something to just needing attention"(133). No matter the cultural obsession with the surface or shape of things there is a fine line between love, art, and cruelty.

Character

With names that echo the first humans in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Adam and Evelyn certainly fall under the category of characters that show the essence of human behavior. Though my main focus was not on that comparison (it is important to acknowledge it) *The Shape of Things* is more than a temptation of man by woman. I cared to focus more on the relationship between artist and audience, artist and sculpture, LaBute's Adam and Evelyn.

Adam is our protagonist plucked from obscurity and placed on a pedestal. The butt of all Phillip's jokes and too much of a nice guy to have landed Jenny in the past, Adam is the everyman of student loan debt who lacks practical experience with women. Evelyn appears spray paint in hand ready to crusade against false art; how could Adam help falling in love with a beautiful woman who pays attention to him? The

intoxication of having attention paid to you can make you do some crazy things. Adam loses weight, gets contacts, changes up his style, tattoos his body, gets a nose job, and gives up his friends when asked.

Evelyn is the temperamental mastermind behind as she puts it, “changing someone’s world [by making him] a *human* sculpture” (p 118). She gives the impression of a doting girlfriend. It appears as if she cares about him. What you see isn’t what you get though, as we find out in her explosive thesis presentation where she comes clean about how she has felt about the last 18 weeks with Adam. Coaxing Adam to fit a better more attractive mold, she emulates a romantic relationship, but her motives are not pure.

She dodges responsibility through semantics about “perspective”. Perspective does not over shadow intention. As thoughtful as a syllabus, Evelyn carefully planned and executed an overhaul of Adam from haircut to personality. The dilemma is not whether or not these improved him from an Italian Vogue or match.com perspective. The dilemma is that her argument is based on a mutual idea that cannot be both true and false at the same time. From her perspective her relationship with Adam was purely for the sake of artistic transformation. From Adam’s perspective they were in love.

Adam, devastated, approaches Evelyn afterwards to ask why? She replies that art is subjective. By her logic if the relationship was real for him it was real; conversely if it was fake to her it was never real. She exits. Adam is left alone with the art exhibit documenting his transformation. The actor playing Adam in my production surveyed the scene. First, he picked up his signature jacket. Then he tried it back on. Before finally,

returning the jacket to the exhibit. In this moment of clarity, Adam found this jacket no longer fit the man he had become.

Spectacle

I staged the play in two different venues due to scheduling conflicts during finals week. The first was held in the Recital Hall in the Art building. I scouted this location because Evelyn gives a thesis presentation near the end of the play. She has a Power Point slide show and exhibition gallery documenting her transformation of Adam. The actor who played Evelyn stood behind the podium and used a clicker to progress through her slide show. She even openly acknowledged Adam, Phillip, and Jenny who had joined the seated audience for the presentation.

The hall holds a formality in its architecture and raised stage. The main curtain was lowered for the entire show to push the actors to the forefront of the stage towards the audience. The raised platform on stage right was used in the café scene between Evelyn, Adam, and Jenny. Adam and Philip hung their feet off the front of stage during their scene on the quad. The apron also served as Jenny and Philip's apartment. For set pieces and dressing I used chairs, a bench, and an array of drinking vessels.

The second performance was held in the black box space, also known as the Cave, in the Arts and Communications Building. This room is much more intimate than the hall because it only holds 40 audience members instead of hundreds. The back wall was assembled from periactoids. All of the set pieces from a bed to benches were configured with rehearsal blocks of varying height and size. Based on the feedback I got from

audience members who attended both performances, they preferred the intimacy of the black box space.

Music

The following is a selection of songs included on my pre-show playlist. Each song was sourced to give a particular vibe about relationships. Most deal specifically with moments in the play that correlate with Adam and Evelyn's relationship. A CD is included in the binder pocket.

"Amsterdam" by Guster

The chorus of this song asks the speaker's former girlfriend to re-evaluate her perspective: "I wanna see how it looks/From way up on your cloud/You're never coming down/ Are you getting somewhere?/ Or did you get lost in Amsterdam?" It gets at how Adam and Evelyn were on different planes of thought entirely when it came to their relationship. Evelyn's perspective was skewed. She thought she could make art and get out of being judged by validating everyone's opinion.

"The Animals Were Gone" by Damien Rice

On page 121, Evelyn says she finds herself "creating strong moral ambiguity" in proportion to the amount of change in Adam. Adam is a romantic, but he also fools around on Evelyn with Jenny. Rice blends the heartache of a break-up with whimsy in these few lines: "We can get a house and some boxes on the lawn/We can make babies and accidental songs." They both made choices they can't take back. Her betrayal reframed his identity. His thinking was illuminated because of her. "I know I've been a

liar and I know I've been a fool/I hope we didn't break it but I'm glad we broke the rules". In the world after the play is over I believe Adam is a better man for having been in this situation because he's been forced to form his own opinions and grow.

"Extraordinary Machine" by Fiona Apple

Evelyn is an Extraordinary Machine systematically and enthusiastically pursuing a candidate who's, "no good at being uncomfortable, so he can't stop saying exactly the same" so she can start her thesis project. Adam is a perfectly malleable candidate. She explains in her thesis how devoid of emotion choosing Adam was when she clarifies "...but this I'm afraid was not done out of care or concern. This is a matter of can I instill 'x' amount of change in this creature using only manipulation as my palette knife?" (LaBute 120).

Evelyn, like Fiona Apple believes that "If there was a better way to go then it would find me". It's like the ultimate passive aggressive statement. Like the audience has to be understanding of her situation because she had no choice, but to manipulate Adam. Like she had no choice, but to follow through with her art project.

"Little Miss Can't Be Wrong" by Spin Doctors

Lovingly added this 90s anti-ballad that voices all the same mean sentiments Adam does in the final scene but with rhyme. Evelyn is always half quoting or saying she isn't aware of deep running pop culture as if she's too sophisticated for that. When Adam references "The Metamorphosis" by Franz Kafka, Evelyn acts completely clueless. This is a little suspect, because she is a well-read graduate student at University, so one would expect that she have a passing knowledge of 20th century literature.

“She Doesn’t Get It” by The Format

This is such an Adam song. “Suddenly between sheets and eyelids/ I am reminded why I don’t do this/ I fall in love far too quickly/I tried it once/ It never caught on/ I was the only one who got burned”. Adam realizes there is no reasoning with someone who allows such a spectrum of grey to surround her work.

“Misty” by Ella Fitzgerald

Neil LaBute makes an outdated reference to Play Misty for Me (1971) Dir. Clint Eastwood when Adam and Evelyn are in bed. Of course Evelyn has never heard of this movie either.

“Somebody That I Used to Know” by Gotye

There’s a moment when Adam and Evelyn are in bed together and she whispers in his ear. She never says out loud what she shared with him beyond it being one of the few things she meant. I like to think that one of the things she could have whispered, “you felt so happy you could die”.

Language: Art Work

Using the database at the David Owsley Museum of Art, I sourced images to use as scene transitions instead of having complicated set pieces. Printouts are included. Some were selected simply for their phallic nature (Squash by Edward Weston). I found Rising Dawn by Adolph Alexander Weinman, a bronze leafed statue to mirror the marble and late addition plaster leaf statue that Evelyn defaces with a spray painted penis to show her contempt for false art.

Others set the scene. For example when the four friends meet for dinner there is an etching of two men and two women at a table, *Memory* by John Sloan. The woman in the forefront looks decidedly disinterested while the woman in the background has a well-meaning smile on her face typical of Evelyn and Jenny respectively.

Even the obvious choice, a portrait of Adam and Eve by Antonio Molinari, was included. The allusion to the temptation is also evident in the portrait. *Waterfront No. 1* by David Burlyuk was used to set the scene for Adam and Phillip's confrontation on the quad. Its fresh, bright coloration started the scene in a light manner.

When Adam clandestinely meets with Jenny at the park I used Henri St. Laurent's *Young Girls, One Lover* to illustrate the different levels each relationship is operating on. Both girls appear in the upper half of the image in a personalized zone, but only one girl appears with the lover in the bottom half of the painting.

Using the artwork to transition the show gave a salon feel to the show. Few of the works went together on any theme of subject or medium. The grouping then found its cohesion as it related to each scene and the show as a whole.

Theme

Evelyn concludes her thesis presentation with the following sentiment:

"As for me, I have no regrets or feelings of remorse for my actions, the manufactured emotions...none of it. I have always stood by the single and simple conceit that I am an artist. Only that. I follow in a long tradition of artists who believe that there is not such concept as religion, or government, community or

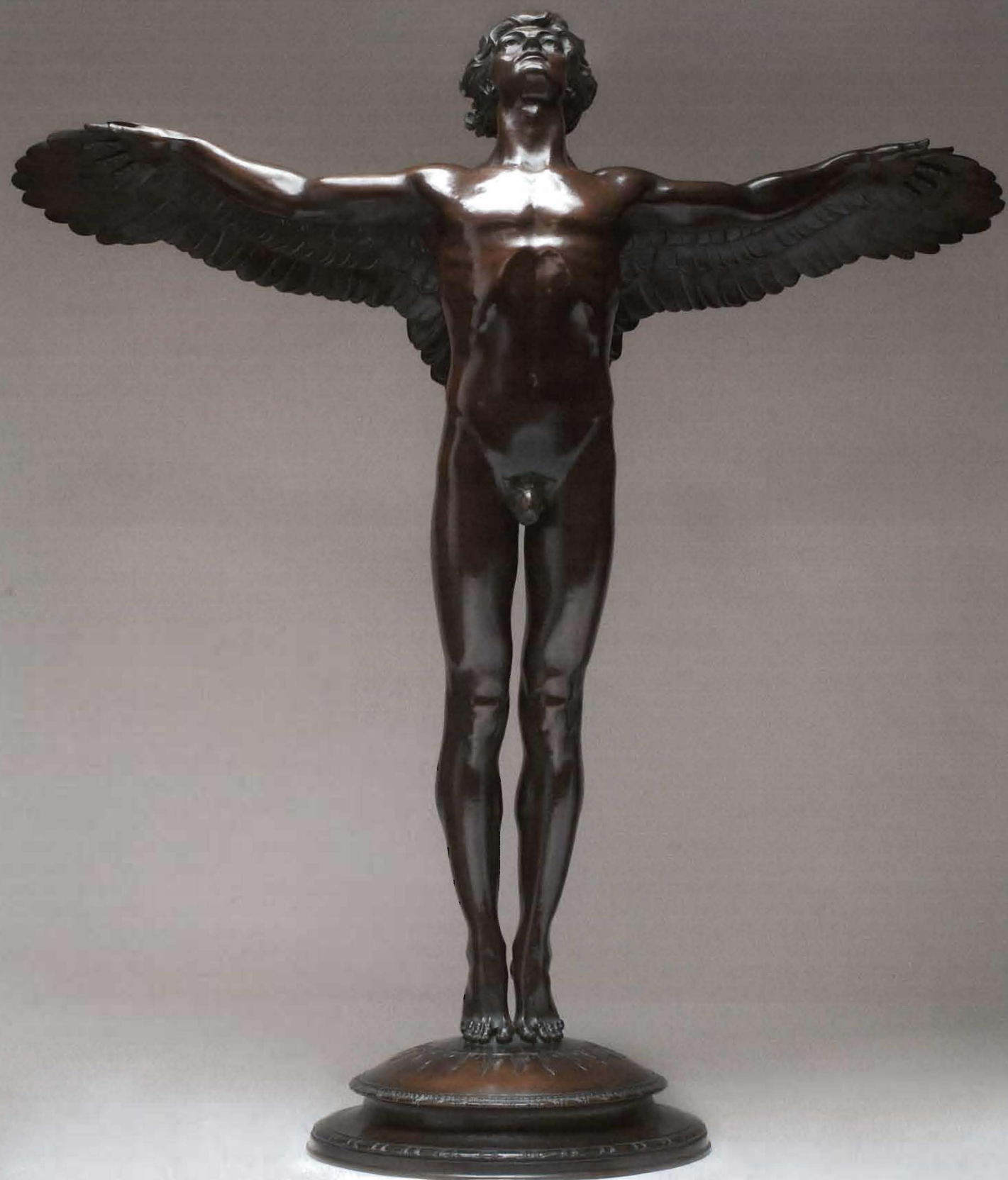
even family. There is only art. Art that must be created. Whatever the cost.”

(LaBute 122)

I gleaned this from producing *The Shape of Things*. Art is collaboration between the artist and audience. To manipulate the audience with semantics or for shock value discredits the creator not those tricked. Ultimately, the kind of art I want to make differs from Evelyn’s art in almost every way. Her art picks away at people. She labels her art perfect in its readiness for mass consumption. The artist elicits an aesthetic reaction from the audience, and the audience in turn forms an opinion or a counter point to the work of art they saw. The art we make should inspire others to see. To see the image, themselves, or the world in a new and exciting way. The art we make should inspire others to seek understanding. To seek out details about the history, context, and importance of art. Being an artist to me is that the art I create should inspire others to create.



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